

Critical Pedagogy and Art for Social Justice

Teaching Teachers

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Abstract

This paper explores the problems of standardised testing and the kind of education resulting from high stakes tests. The author utilises action research by examining her own teaching practices and student responses to the inclusion of critical pedagogy and art-infused assignments to increase perspectives of social justice in education.

Introduction

Research into the purpose of education results in multiple, somewhat disparate answers, including teacher and student-centred approaches. Conservative philosophies include essentialism and a top-down approach to education. They also intend to pass on the social status quo to successive generations, emphasising obedience, respect, memorisation, and national patriotism. Progressive approaches include student-centred classrooms and critical pedagogies with the intent of appraising and improving society. At its best, this style engages students to question social expectations, power, and authority. Proponents and critics of both approaches tend to parallel conservative and liberal politics in democratic societies.

In recent decades, world systems have swung towards conservative and economic models of education. The principal tools for such systems are the numerous standardised national and international tests used to determine placements in high schools and universities as well as international rankings. Tests occurring at the completion of junior high in Japan determine whether or not students can even

go on in public high schools. Germany's tests determine the level of education available for secondary students. England's and China's high school completion tests determine the caliber of university available to high school graduates. And in the United States, Common Core exams reward and punish not only students, but also teachers, administrators, and the reputation of individual schools. Internationally, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) created the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). In 2015, over a half million students from 72 countries took this exam that assesses student knowledge in science, mathematics, problem solving, and financial literacy (OECD, 2017). Results are covered by media, often criticising their nation's test results. This happens in spite of the fact that students taking such tests vary considerably from country to country (Bracey, 2009).

Slavish adherence to the highly competitive environment of high stakes testing has major consequences for educational outcomes as well as interest in the profession of teaching. In the United States, for example, students preparing to become teachers have declined by 40% between 2008-2014 (Sawchuk, 2016). McDiarmid, Dean of the School of Education at the University of North Carolina, suggested that a combination of Common Core State Standards, high-stakes tests, and linking test scores to teacher evaluations have greatly contributed to the decline of interest in the teaching profession (Westervelt, 2015).

When tests occupy such high importance in the futures of students, it makes sense that teachers would be more concerned with their students passing the tests than following their own interests, questioning the relevance of such tests, or being willing to make mistakes as they learn. Getting the right answer on exams that are far too often multiple-choice tests, for which only one answer is correct, takes precedence. It also creates unfortunate patterns of belief in the minds of students and teachers. Children quickly come to believe that what is most important is to be correct, and that there is only one correct answer to important questions. Teachers abandon their original reasons for becoming teachers – to nurture children and develop their creativity – for teaching them to correctly answer test questions. In addition, some countries are witnessing diminishing availability of creative curriculum, such as arts-related classes, as money is cut for such subjects to add more for STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) courses. The University of Warwick in the UK reported a 50% decline in General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) academic qualifications, as well as a decline

in teachers specialising in the arts (BBC, 2015).

There is another danger when determining the “right” answer on test questions takes precedence. In order to succeed, students and teachers become more motivated to learn the “right” answer than to question it. At an extreme, such thinking can give way to highly problematic indoctrination, such as has been seen in Nazi Germany in the past and North Korea in the present (Holocaust Encyclopedia, n.d.). In general, when people are not taught to critique what they are told is true, they are more likely to believe without question what they hear from information that may be biased, incomplete, or discriminatory (Tversky & Kahneman, 1975).

This article suggests ways to introduce students of this constrained system to humanitarian values based on critical pedagogy and arts-based education. The broad research question is as follows: In what ways can educators use critical pedagogy and arts-based learning to provide more student-centred, progressive learning opportunities? I write from a US context, but as many countries are following similar conservative and economic educational models, it is my belief that the content is applicable in Japan and other national models. I will begin with some contextual background on problems with standardised curriculum, then move to examples from my own teaching. I use an action-based personal examination of my own course instruction to consider a useful model of critical pedagogy.

Backgrounds and Challenges

Since the 1983 “Nation at Risk” report that condemned American education, continuing through “No Child Left Behind” and “Common Core,” US education has been on a “banking method” path of politically constrained material to be memorised and repeated back on standardised tests. Content in literature and social studies courses has long been politicised, as is true in numerous countries. For example, the latest revision to history books in 2010 by the Texas State Board of Education and used beginning in 2015 downplay the horror of slavery. A Fordham Institute review of the Texas history standards found them to be “troubling” and “misrepresentative” (Texas, 2010). Additionally, there are lists of “banned books,” many of which include great literature, because parents or school boards object to some of the content. They include *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, and *Moby Dick*.

Given constraints and nationalist perspectives that extend from politics into education,

perhaps I should not be surprised that in the 12 years that I have taught university students in Florida, I have not had a single student be aware of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) prior to my introduction of the document in class. It seems shocking that students in a country that was fundamental to creating the UDHR should not be aware of its existence. At the same time, it seems revolutionary that a country steeped in legal racism at the time of its creation (1948) would have been involved at all. Thus it is in the US at present. There is a longstanding belief in the US as a humanitarian “beacon on a hill.” At the same time, the country has become increasingly insular and nativist, with plans to build walls, increase defenses, and reduce opportunities for refugees and other immigrants to find a safe space to rebuild their lives. Such policies are constructed and reinforced through rhetoric that suggests danger to the US public if refugees continue to enter US space, in spite of research to the contrary (Nowrasteh, 2016). Thus, it appears at least some nativist policy depends on a lack of documented information to inform the general public. Meanwhile, political rhetoric decrying migration and associating it with terrorism goes unchecked (Greenslade, 2015; Reuters, 2015).

Brazilian educator and philosopher Paulo Freire understood that advocates for social justice must be critical thinkers. His reading circles were based on valuing the knowledge and experiences of illiterate adults and using their struggles to teach literacy through analysing social and political processes that thrived by keeping the illiterate, impoverished social strata uninformed. Freire recognised that basal readers, having nothing to do with the reality of the students’ lives, were poor instruments for critical thinking and literacy. Similarly, teaching the mythology of Christopher Columbus as a hero and “discoverer” of America, of pilgrims helping American Indians, and Founding Fathers as all Christians only serves to preserve the faulty concept of American exceptionalism, bestowing the title of “anti-American” on those who would dare to disagree.

In spite of America’s standardised testing system, which causes most public school teachers to “teach to the test,” US educational rhetoric promotes the term “critical thinking skills.” As Clabaugh (2008) deftly illustrates, true critical thinking education would undermine the purpose of education that is connected to passing on conventional social standards, beliefs, and purposes. My students illustrate this concept. After reading about atrocities committed against American Indians in the name of God by the Pilgrims, the majority still prefer to teach the myths to school children. Their

justifications include the following: “I would not want children to think their country is bad,” and “Wouldn’t it spoil their Thanksgiving holiday?” These beliefs are also a product of deep-seated cultural values that require critical thinking and awareness to analyse in a more objective way (Shaules, 2015).

Genuine growth towards social justice will only come when more students learn to use genuine critical thinking skills as they examine society. It requires the ability to consider diverse perspectives when looking at issues. Is that not what art does, as well? In 2006-2007, the academic journal *Social Justice* published two volumes of articles examining the relationships between art forms and social justice. Many contributors also examined participatory art to further social change. Topics included feminist struggles, contesting hegemonic discourses, self-determining representations of indigenous people, and an essay by Bahamian playwright Gregory Strachan, who tried to create a theater that would educate “the general public with more critical sensibility, promoting tolerance and democratic ideals, and eschewing political corruption and the culture of patronage” (in David & McCaughan, 2007, p.3). Such concepts are not in sync with the predominant international methods of education at present, in which a certain answer dominates in each high-stakes test question and human capital is advanced for the sake of national economic gain.

My Work

I work with students who plan to become teachers, mostly in kindergarten through secondary schools in the United States. My teaching is influenced and informed by my interest in international cultures and my research and service with war-affected families and resettled refugees in numerous countries. Given the extraordinary refugee and asylum-seeker numbers of recent years, it is important that teacher candidates understand the nature of this displacement and the international treaties that provide protection to refugees, such the 1951 Geneva Convention and 1967 Protocol, as well as the UDHR and other International Conventions. They are likely to encounter refugee and asylum-seeking students in US classrooms, so they need to have accurate information about their circumstances rather than myths perpetuated by some politicians and media outlets.

The state in which I teach, Florida, is a highly conservative state. In 2014, Florida’s residents re-elected a governor who has cut university funding for several years in a

row, has publicly demeaned university education not related to STEM pursuits, and has supported legislation that eliminated pay raises for teachers who choose to increase their academic knowledge with a Master's degree. He is also in sync with President Trump in regards to eschewing climate change and reducing refugee resettlement. He has proposed that Florida, always one of the top resettlement states, cease to admit refugees, in defiance of national law. This is the setting in which I infuse human rights knowledge, critical thinking, and social activism.

The only required course I teach is *Schools and Society*, a sociological course that is under attack in Florida, with several universities cutting it from their required courses for education majors. The certification test that candidates must pass to become Florida teachers has gradually seen most of the sociological course content deleted from the examination. To maintain this course, because my institution believes in the need for future teachers to understand social impacts on education, we have loaded it with assignments that meet requirements we must demonstrate to numerous bodies of authority: the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, the Board of Governors for State Colleges and Universities, and the University Board of Trustees.

Schools and Society encompasses topics that are essential in social justice dialogue, and they are critical in shaping teacher skills and dispositions. We explore the affects of historical events, predominant social and educational philosophies, laws and court cases, economics, and politics on teaching and learning, defined in a broad sense. We engage in numerous discussions about injustice, such as inequitable school funding; gender and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) issues; the treatment of children of color and students who are learning English; children with special needs; poverty and homelessness; the political nature of teaching history in US schools; and consequences of curricular standards and high-stakes testing. One of my intents for this course is to support education as a means to social justice in addition to academic excellence and critical thinking.

Acts of social justice are a necessary tool for increasing human rights. Tibbetts (2002) and others have explored definitions of Human Rights Education (HRE) as it has gradually taken more international prominence through the work of some governments, the United Nations Decade of HRE, US-based Human Rights Educational Associates (HREA), and others (see Bajaj, 2011; Flowers, 2003). Tibbetts includes a Values and

Awareness Model, an approach typically found in formal classrooms. One weakness she finds is that this content-driven approach could ironically take on a format antithetical to human rights: that of an authoritarian “banking” model made famous by the father of critical pedagogy, Paulo Friere (1968; 2000). To avoid this model in which the teacher is the source of all knowledge and the students simply absorb the content, one must create a course in which students not only take in content, but also reflect on it critically and creatively, and put new knowledge into practice. I approach this problem by integrating critical thinking with art forms.

Art-Infused Critical Pedagogy

My university, the University of South Florida Sarasota-Manatee, is located in the “arts capital of Florida,” with a highly regarded opera company and ballet, symphony, numerous theaters, the Ringling College of Art, museums, and numerous art associations. When we chose to distinguish ourselves from the main USF campus in Tampa, it made sense to collaborate with the arts community, as so many studies demonstrate ways in which art enhances learning of core subjects as well as being a subject worthy of pursuing for its own sake. Though all institutions in Florida are pressured to pursue STEM research and teaching, our School of Education chose STEAM, adding art to STEM. Working with art associations and artists in residence has helped me to redesign my Schools and Society course.

Four years ago I switched texts to *The Critical Pedagogy Reader*, edited by Darder, Baltodano, and Torres (2008; 2017). Articles in this reader challenge status quo beliefs regarding standardised curriculum and testing, race and gender, media messages, and surveillance in schools. I complement the readings with recent videos and class discussions of current events to highlight the relevance of the readings. For examples, we examined race and the events in Ferguson, Missouri, and a Florida county that tried to eliminate standardised state tests (and why they ultimately changed their minds due to economic penalties), and other current events.

My course begins with three weeks of challenging readings by numerous critical pedagogists: Michael Apple, Herbert Kohl, Paulo Freire, Henry Giroux, bell hooks, and others. These authors define a number of terms used in the discourse of critical pedagogy, such as banking system of education, critical discourse, social reproduction, hegemony, hidden curriculum, and many more.

I keep student motivation high by including engaging TED Talks about creativity and considering alternative perspectives (for example, Heffernan, 2013; Lesser, 2010; & Robinson, 2006). I also include an artistic project I experienced at the 2014 InSEA (International Society for Education through Art) Conference in Melbourne, Australia. A Swedish artist led a remarkable workshop with many large pieces of cardboard cut up from boxes. She had scissors, razor knives, tape, and other supplies available for the groups that she created by having participants count off by fives. The goal was to make the room more artistic with the materials given. Every several minutes, she handed each group a note card with a specific direction the group was to obey until the next direction was given. Directions on the cards included "Sing while you work," "Do not talk to each other," "Steal something from another group," etc. The directions were intentionally not helpful for the goal of the project. At the end, the Swedish author began by noting how easy we were to manipulate and make obey authority, as we readily complied with the requests on the notes cards, even when they were unreasonable. This conversation moved on to a discussion on how easy it is to get people to forego their human rights, and thus, how important it is to emphasise critical thinking skills.

This exercise had a significant impact on me, and I determined I would use this exercise in my teaching. Thus, in my Schools and Society course, I asked my students to bring in cut-up cardboard for the third class, and we proceeded with this exercise. I was fascinated by the results. These students were planning to become elementary school teachers. The majority were more interested in how to comply with my unreasonable directions than critiquing the issue of the directions I gave the groups. In our post-activity discussion, we talked about ways in which this kind of activity could be used to increase social justice and human rights discussions in their classes. Because I videotaped each group, they were able to witness issues of authoritarianism, diverse reactions, and gender differences. One of the clips clearly demonstrated a male student assuming authority, which facilitated a discussion about gender expectations and power.

Another of my assignments comes after we discuss a challenging article in the reader by Peter McLauren, which defines numerous terms used to discuss critical pedagogy. Their assignment for the following week is to choose and define one of the terms creatively. They can write a song, create a collage or a video, do a pantomime, paint, write a poem – anything creative that helps them and others understand the term.

The results have exceeded my expectations, in that the students demonstrate far deeper thinking about their term than were they to simply look up the definition, and they tell me that they remember not only their term, but also those of their classmates who have produced high-quality artistic definitions. Here is one student's poetic definition of "social reproduction":

I know your child before he walks in the door.
I know your child by the type of your door.
I will teach your child what I think he should know
So that he can be just like you when he gets old.

Another defined subordinate culture by creating an acrostic using both poetry and color symbolic of the US and of conservative (red S, U, B, O, and C, U, L, T, U, R, and E) and liberal (blue R, D, I, N, A, T, and E) opinion:

Social spin
Utilized to
Benefit the rich while
Oppressing those who
Refuse to disengage in
Deep and
Intelligent conversations that could
Negate the endless trials
And
Tribulations that the majority
Endure daily for the sake of a dominant
Culture shielded by the
Umbrella of
Lies designed to brainwash everyday Americans
To vote and support an
Unbalanced approach to capitalism that
Results in a Nation in disarray where
Everyone, including the dominant culture, eventually crumbles!

Other students have created collages and videos to represent their assigned term. Though they receive this assignment with some doubts, they later discuss how much

their need to be creative awakened in them a depth of understanding they did not reach simply from reading assigned articles. Using artistic expression causes them to think deeply about the implications of the terms.

Art Collaborations

My School of Education established a PAInT Center (Partnerships for Arts-Integrated Teaching) to connect teaching with arts-centred pedagogies. We have accessed many free opportunities for our students to attend community art events and performances. I require my students to attend one art event and to explain ways in which the event and similar experiences can enhance student learning. Their reflections have created a space in which we can discuss social class and power as well as art-enhanced learning. For instance, several of my students have written that they have never attended a ballet, opera, play, a museum exhibit because a) they felt they were only attended by members of the upper class, and b) they could not afford them. These reflections have seeded wonderful discussions about social class, expectations, equity, dominance, economics, and power. Most of my students also expressed how unexpectedly delighted they were to have the artistic experience. Again, their expectations were that such productions were not for them. Given the importance and power of artistic expression in children's lives, it is critical that future teachers experience the arts' transformative power for themselves.

Social Action

Human rights education, like critical pedagogy, must include some form of social action to be robust. I begin this component of the course with a diversity assignment. Students must complete 10 hours in situations in which they would typically not be involved, were it not for the requirements of this class. I make suggestions such as attending alternative religious services, political organisations with which they are not affiliated, social organisations with which they are not familiar, ethnic festivals, LGBTQ celebrations, migrant workers meetings, etc. Many write striking reflections about this exercise, in terms of learning about diverse people, beliefs, and other situations they would have otherwise ignored. Many express lessons of recognizing important similarities between themselves and others that they did not expect. Such self-actualising lessons are important in accepting and respecting diverse cultures and lifestyles.

Students' culminating assignment is a project in which they combine what they learn from readings, research (both academic articles and field research), and creative expression to tackle an issue of social justice and present it to an audience. I have changed from requiring a research paper to requesting a researched creative presentation. Plenty of courses require research papers. But most of my students go on to become K-12 teachers. They need to know how to find and analyse research, but they also need to be able to present information in engaging and motivating ways as teachers. They must include diverse perspectives on their research question, social engagement through fieldwork, and an ethical response to their question. I encourage them to use multiple forms of expression, and many create PowerPoints, Prezis, and Panoptus that include images, music, and video clips that express more about their topics and questions than empirical papers can do.

One student was impressed by the article from our text that criticised security measures at schools that supposedly protect those in the buildings. She was a member of a school board that was planning to spend a large sum of money implementing such measures. She talked with members of the board and school, conducted academic research on the topic, and presented an alternative opinion to the school board. Another student described discrimination she endured because of her wavy African American hair. She examined the politicising of Black women's hair and school codes denying students the right to come to school with their natural hair. She used her findings to help young Black students feel happy with their hair. Her presentation included poetry, quotations, images of African women, academic articles, and popular media clips. One student worked with local food banks to learn about the affects of hunger on children. Still another unpacked the rhetoric of Common Core educational strategies as used in an affluent school compared to a Title I school (school with a high percentage of students receiving free or reduced-cost school lunches) in the community. Using interviews and her own research, her findings reflected those of Jean Anyon's (1980) famous study in which she found that school methods reflected the qualities needed for children to attain the same kinds of employment their parents had. For example, schools in working class communities tended to use rote-learning methods with little room for explanation and discussion. In contrast, those in high-class neighborhoods were taught and encouraged to analyse and problem solve. They were even encouraged to express disagreement, something that could result in punishment in the working class community schools. My student found that teachers in the lower SES school spent more time drilling test skills and adhering to the Common Core suggestions than the affluent one.

A major goal of all my courses is teaching my students to engage in critical analysis as a result of including critical pedagogy and the arts. At one point in a recent class, I had my students examine a passage that I critiqued as a part of a New Zealand Refugee Resettlement Strategy policy paper (2014):

Employment provides income, status, the ability to support family and social links. Meeting challenges at work can support a sense of personal satisfaction and much of people's social contact is provided through their jobs. Unemployment is associated with poorer mental health and lower levels of satisfaction with life.

I asked my students to consider the context and analyse the quote. It requires a great deal of critical thinking ability. One of my students responded thus:

Before this class, I would have just read it and assumed it to be true. But after the exercises we have done, I recognise that the writers are upper-class, comfortable employees writing about newcomers to New Zealand who do not know English and probably do not have needed job skills. Jobs they may be pressured to take are hardly likely to help them feel good about their status, nor help them to make friends and move up in society.

Other students agreed. I told them I had a hard time convincing my co-workers at the Ministry in New Zealand to understand that kind of thinking. It requires perspective-taking, a mind open to alternatives to the status quo, and some vulnerability to recognise ways in which our own social class takes power from those who struggle for equality.

Discussion

In course assessments, almost all of my students stated that they began with doubts about the philosophy of critical pedagogy and the method of artistic expression for a university course. After completing the assignments, discussions, and experiences, however, they felt that their ability to delve deeply into critical examinations of social assumptions was enhanced through the nontraditional approach to the topics. Most fulfilling for me is seeing how the use of art and creative activities help my students to understand and advance their thinking on issues of social justice and human rights.

Through my action research exploring the use of critical pedagogy with arts-related assignments, I found my students to be not only more engaged with their course work, but also more understanding of complex social issues, such as poverty, sexual identity, and migration. The use of experiential and creative assignments helped them to consider multiple perspectives, with the result that they moved beyond the kind of right/wrong thinking perpetuated by a multiple choice testing mentality.

Our highly complex world is not well understood through a simplistic lens of answers that are either right or wrong. As we move ever more into a globalised notion of society and citizenship, our world education systems need to keep pace with not just the economic needs of corporate thinking, but also humanistic needs for social justice. The economic educational model of human capital endorsed by multinational organisations such as the World Bank and OECD is insufficient to provide models of social justice. They need to be balanced by models of Human Rights education, critical thinking, and creativity, all of which support analysis and critique. But teachers cannot teach what they have not learned themselves. University Schools of Education need to implement more opportunities for students to explore deeply alternative perspectives and to critique status quo thinking. Without these tools, formal education provides the potential for propaganda and discrimination that perpetuate injustice.

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